

PREFACE



“AS LONG AS THIS STATE ENDURES, one is, like God, sufficient unto oneself.”¹ I was a sixteen-year-old high school student when I heard these words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau for the first time. I found them vile and despicable and would repeat them every time I crossed the threshold of the school bathroom. I realized that many talented people—every day, every hour, every second—were drowning in the swamp of self-sufficiency.

I remember our philosophy teacher in my senior year. He told us about the insights of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel: “A beautiful sunset, dear students, exists in reality only if it exists beforehand in your thoughts. Without man’s thought, nothing exists. Being is the fruit of thought. There is no reality apart from the thought of the thinking subject; the rest is only the product of this thought.” Although still a teenager and not having seen the movie *The Matrix* (it came out twenty years later), I well understood that in making assertions of this kind, we were going beyond self-sufficiency and entering a state of insanity.

But when, a few months later, in 1979, I came across these words by Albert Camus in our philosophy

1. J.-J. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), fifth walk.

textbook, namely, “Consciousness comes into the world with revolt,”² I experienced a burst of joy and optimism. Camus’ words signaled to me the revolt against oneself, against the spiritual indifference that devours us.

The influence of philosophy on our lives—on education, culture, politics, society in general—is undeniable. Plato inspired the Christian world in large part until the thirteenth century; Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas together inspired Europeans from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century; modern civilization is fundamentally the product of Descartes’ thought; in the twentieth century, Marx considerably influenced the behavior of the world’s elites and the destiny of many nations; Nietzsche is still today the point of reference for all who aspire to “superhumanity,” to the violent affirmation of the “I”; and Rousseau is the intellectual father of a multitude of pseudo-religions which for two hundred years have been trying with surprising success to substitute themselves for Christianity.

Philosophers produce ideas that invade our hearts and minds—for good or for ill. It is important to understand these ideas, and to unravel them to determine what is true about them and what is false, which ones elevate man, and which ones debase him. But it is even more important to determine *what manner of person* is the philosopher who is speaking to us.

“Immanuel Kant’s life story,” wrote the German poet Heinrich Heine, “is difficult to describe, because he had

2. A. Camus, *L’homme Révolté*, 133e édition, collection NRF (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1951), p. 20.

neither a life nor a story.”³ A philosopher without life and without history—is such a philosopher credible? Is his philosophy viable?

We like to debate the ideas of this or that philosopher, but too often we leave out the study of his personality. We are interested in what the philosopher says, not in what he is. This is a very serious mistake, because behind ideas there is a heart, and if this heart is “rotten,” the ideas will be rotten too, and the one who imbibes such ideas will end up rotten himself. The opposite is also true: the powerful and true ideas of some philosophers are often the expression of a noble and magnanimous heart which communicates to us the vital inspiration we need to purify ourselves, to elevate ourselves, and to reach the heights of our humanity.

This book begins with Descartes (1596–1650) who is undoubtedly the father of modern philosophy. Descartes needed certainty, which is natural for a man of science. But to achieve this result, he created a method according to which thought is the only criterion of certainty: “I think, therefore I am.” His belief: my existence is proven by the fact that I think. If I stopped thinking, the evidence of my existence would disappear. Therefore, I exist when I think, and only when I think. Descartes reduces being to thinking.

3. T. Pinkard, “Preface to the Second Edition, in T. Pinkard, ed., *Heine: “On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany,”* trans. H. Pollack-Milgate, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808043.006, pp. 4–118.

His “I think, therefore I am” inevitably becomes “I am, because I think.” For Hegel, who will finish Descartes’ work, thought ceases to be the proof of being: it becomes the cause of being, it produces being. Descartes probably did not understand where his philosophy would lead. By making thought the only criterion of certainty, however, he plunged humanity into the most absolute subjectivism.

The first part of this book considers those I call *the destroyers*: Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. In studying their lives and their thought, it seems clear that two of the three spiritual centers of man—the heart, the intellect, and the will—have atrophied in each of these philosophers. In Descartes, the heart and the will are strangled by *reason*; in Rousseau, reason and the will are suffocated by the *heart*; in Nietzsche, reason and the heart are absorbed by the *will*. Descartes embodies rationalism; Rousseau, sentimentalism; Nietzsche, voluntarism.

Descartes, who was not religiously minded but outwardly observed the rites of Christianity, created a way of thinking that was incompatible with the Christian faith. Without wanting to, he became the father of modern atheism. Rousseau, who had a religious spirit but did not believe in Jesus Christ, fashioned a parody of Christianity that was as infamous as it was seductive. Nietzsche, anti-religious and anti-Christian, produced the cruel and dramatic image of the “superman,” the antithesis of the God-man of the Christian religion.

Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche are founders. Kant and Hegel are only the logical continuation of Descartes: they elaborate systems on the basis of the Cartesian idea. Although they possess intellects of exceptional power, their originality is only “secondary.” For this reason, we shall deal with neither Kant nor Hegel here.

Nor shall we refer to Karl Marx, the intellectual heir to Rousseau, in the body of our text, but because Marxism was the dominant ideology of the twentieth century, let us say a few words about him in this preface.

Like Rousseau, Marx was religious but unlike Rousseau, he believed in Jesus Christ—so much so that he declared war on him. Marx, baptized into the Lutheran Church at the age of six, became a satanist. He wrote “satanic verses,” published during his lifetime in the German magazine *Athenäum*: “The hellish vapors rise and fill the brain, till I go mad and my heart is utterly changed. See this sword? The prince of darkness sold it to me.”⁴

Robert Payne and Richard Wurmbrand point to other poems by Marx that are equally explicit:

Thus, heaven I've forfeited, I know it full well / My
soul, once true to God / Is chosen for hell . . . /
Nothing but revenge is left to me. / I shall build my
throne high overhead, / Cold, tremendous shall its

4. K. Marx, *Der Spielmann* (Player, also translated as The Fiddler), written in 1837 and published in *Athenäum: Zeitschrift für das gebildete Deutschland*, January 23, 1841.